

Meetings between Independent Professional Researchers and the PRO February/March 2000

1. Introduction

The meetings were called to:

1. Discuss the service provided between the PRO and the independent professional researchers, including some specific proposals made by the PRO regarding the Lists.
2. To hear the professionals views on the quality of PRO services generally. The professionals are well placed to comment on PRO services as regular users and as users of other comparable services. A series of meetings in 1995/96 had been very successful in identifying an agenda for improvement at the PRO.

1.1 In terms of the Lists of professional researchers issued to enquirers the PRO had two proposals to make. The first was that they would make it clear in their Lists if a researcher had a statement of standards and would encourage enquirers to ask for it before commissioning research. The statement of standards could be from an organisation, could be individually drafted or could follow a PRO template. There would be no requirement to have a statement. With the online lists it was proposed to add a field referring to statements of standards and including a link to the statement of the researcher if it was available on the Internet. For the printed lists it was proposed simply to indicate whether or not a standard existed for the researcher. The PRO would not police the standards – the intention was to clarify for both parties (enquirer and researcher) the kind of service to be provided, thus managing expectations and reducing complaints. If problems did arise then there would be clear documentation between the parties.

1.2 The second proposal was to simplify the lists to plain first names and surnames of researchers. Titles (Dr.) and suffixed initials which indicated qualifications would be removed. The PRO does not verify academic qualifications so cannot publish entries in the Lists which claim them.

1.3 The PRO had been approached by AGRA to discuss the question of recognition of AGRA members on the list. There was at least one other organisation in the field and there may be more. It was not appropriate for the PRO to recognise one organisation at the expense of others, or indeed of individual researchers who might not wish to join an organisation. However AGRA did provide customers with a statement of service standards and this was felt to be useful, for the reasons given above. An earlier suggestion from the PRO (in 1996 following the first series of meetings with researchers) of a framework statement of standards had been strongly opposed by the professional researchers. The problem was now to be tackled on a voluntary basis.

1.4 In relation to various organisations unfavourable reference was made at meetings and by letter to the processes of obtaining membership. It appears that no one organisation could be regarded as being universally acceptable and regarded as representative of all types of professional researcher.

1.5 In addition to the meetings comments were received by letter. Those comments are noted following the notes of the meetings.

1.6 At the meetings an assurance was given that the proceedings would be reported back to all the researchers. This document provides the promised feedback. Please contact us if we have not recorded (at some point) any issue that was raised and you feel to be critical. We also welcome more general comments having seen the overall picture and having had an opportunity to reflect. We expect to issue our conclusions and firm proposals around one month from the despatch of this report.

1.7 The PRO is grateful to all the researchers who took time to attend a meeting and/or to write with comments. We would also like to thank them for the many kind comments regarding the PRO's services.

2-6 Notes of the meetings

2. Independent Professional Researcher Meeting - 10.00-11.00am 6 March 2000 Kew

Present:

RISD: Iain Watt, Guy Grannum and Mark Pearsall

Professional Researchers: Paul Blake, Roger Barrington, Bill Duffin, Tina Hampson, Roger Nixon, Dennis Savage, John Sly and Hilary J Thomas

2.1 Professional Researcher Service: PRO Policy.

2.1.1 There was a discussion on the amendment of the lists. IW stressed it was not intended to be a form of policing of the individual researchers, although some present felt that this is what it would lead to, and would discriminate between those that were signed up to a set of standards, as members of AGRA or ISRA, etc, those who had their own, and those who had none at all.

2.1.2 It was, however, accepted that a new field should be added to the lists to include this information, but it was up to the professional researcher whether they were signed up to the standards of a professional body, had their own service standards, or nothing at all. Links could be established to the statements of relevant professional bodies.

2.1.3 It was accepted that titles and qualifications will be removed from the lists. It was asked if the PRO was going to bring in a charge for the service provided by the PRO. IW said that this was not in current plans.

2.2 PRO Services.

There was a generally positive assessment of services.

2.2.1 JS said there had been cases of delay at the distribution counter, when staff were dealing with queries rather than producing documents which caused queues to build up

and slowed down the supply of documents. IW said this would be brought to the attention of the Document Services Department.

2.2.2 A number of researchers said there were problems in the Microfilm Reading Room. New readers unfamiliar with the reading room were not following procedures properly and were not receiving enough guidance from staff on duty. It was suggested that the staff desk be moved from its present position near to the door, so staff are able to deal with new readers straight away. It was asked if new readers could be shown how to use equipment. There was also a problem with the return of blue boxes, and not enough boxes to go round.

2.2.3 IW said that with the new induction tours for new readers this should now be less of a problem, but we will look at what else could be done to improve the service. The aim was to make the MRR largely self-service.

2.2.4 JS also said he was finding original documents out of order and damaged eg. WO 95. It was suggested a new version of the video be produced covering such points as document handling. IW said that research had shown that only about 25% of new readers had made use of the video and it did not appear to be worthwhile to produce a new version.

2.2.5 BD said he often saw readers leaning and writing over the top of documents when placing orders in Reprographic-ordering, and it was not always the public who were guilty of this. We will bring this to the attention of Document Services Department.

2.2.6 DS and RN raised the question of checking on the availability of documents retained or requisitioned by other departments and problems with DORIS when ordering documents which have sub numbers. These matters should be raised with the Records Management and Information and Records Department.

2.2.7 The meeting ended with the feeling that the services had improved over the past few years and that the improvements had been noticed by all present.

3. Professional Researcher Meeting - 4.00-5.00pm 9 March 2000, Kew

Present:

RISD: Iain Watt, Guy Grannum and Mark Pearsall

Professional Researchers: Michael Gandy, Duncan Harrington, Gillian Hughes, Tim Hughes, Chris Leighton, Susan Moore, Alexander G Smith, Chris Staerck and George Spate.

3.1 PRO Services

3.1.1 DH said that for some classes of records, where Calendars and Indexes are available, this is not always made clear to researchers. IRD will be informed to make this more obvious in the lists.

3.1.2 MG said there had been many improvements over the years, but queues were still a problem. More repository staff were required in the MLDR. Productions had increased in the MLDR, but staff numbers had not changed.

3.1.3 MG also suggested a set of lists at the FRC, but it was pointed out they would take up too much space and they are available on-line.

3.1.4 TH mentioned the new document lockers (which is a pilot scheme) which was appearing to be successful, however, there were too few available, often because documents were being kept out for long periods.

3.1.5 AGS asked about digitisation of documents and MG asked for more indexes to be made available. GG explained that PROCAT was yet to come on-line but would include supplementary finding aids and that PRO lists and indexes were being fed into it. The present online catalogue was just an interim solution. A point was also made that it is difficult to browse the online catalogue when only a partial reference is known.

3.1.6 AGS mentioned that some microfilm was still of very poor quality. SM asked if records could be scanned rather than filmed. IW said that it was actually cheaper to film and scan from film, rather than to scan from original documents. The digitisation of the 1901 Census was the first priority.

3.1.7 MG suggested more indexing by volunteers.

3.2. Professional Researcher Service

3.2.1 Some were concerned at having standard terms and conditions, that it would discriminate against people who did not belong to professional bodies, others that it was too complicated and would put clients off. Some thought it was not for the PRO to get involved with such matters.

3.2.2 The majority of researchers present were happy for the removal of titles and qualifications from the lists. There was general acceptance of a need for a statement of terms and conditions.

3.2.3 It was suggested that the PRO should charge for entries on the Lists. This was not in current plans.

4. Professional Researcher Meeting - 4.00-5.00pm 14 March 2000 FRC

Present:

RISD: Iain Watt and Mark Pearsall

Professional Researchers: Robert Base, Alexander Baron and Niger Kent.

4.1 General Services

4.1.1 Services were felt to have improved greatly in recent years.

4.1.2 AB praised the catalogue which was a great step forward and had been a considerable help to him. Document production and delivery times were much better than in the past.

4.1.3 RB thought the introduction of the document lockers a good idea and thought it should continue.

4.1.4 NK said copying facilities were much better and that the introduction of the new copy cards at Kew was a great improvement. It was noted that RB had had problems with transferring credits from his old copy cards. Staff had to be more aware of people hogging copying machines in the MRR and causing delays for other readers wanting to use the machines.

4.2 Professional Researcher Service.

4.2.1 The meeting thought the proposal for a standard or statement of service with a link from the web was acceptable.

5. Professional Researcher Meeting - 12.00-1.00pm 15 March 2000 Kew

Present:

RISD: Ian Watt, Guy Grannum and Mark Pearsall

Professional Researchers: John Dagger, James Derriman, Anthony Hemans, Bob O'Hara, Ian Hilder, Roger Nixon, Betty Thomson and Tom Tulloch-Marshall

5.1 Comments on General Services

5.1.1 TT-M said there had been improvements in the Repro-ordering service. BT said that the handling of coach parties was much better. TT-M said there were still problems in the MRR with new readers not knowing what to do, though queues had reduced.

5.1.2 AH asked about the class lists, and the availability of provisional lists for classes not yet available/transferred to the PRO. We will raise this with RMD.

5.1.3 RN asked for a couple of terminals in the DRR specifically for ordering and not for browsing.

5.2 Professional Researchers

5.2.1 BO'H asked if the PRO could provide the standard. IW said that we did not want to be seen as parties to any contract between an enquirer and a professional researcher.

5.2.2 JDr said that he had been tested by the India Office before going on their list. This was an approach that was too complicated to do well, would add overheads for the PRO, did not actually provide an assurance of ongoing quality, and was in the case of some specialisms outside existing PRO competence.

5.2.3 JDn asked if the public could be better informed of the requirements needed of clients and researchers. MP said that the cover sheets of the lists and the introduction to the lists on-line will be amended to clarify the responsibilities of the client.

5.2.4 There was general concern as at several other meetings that the subject specialisation of researchers was insufficiently clear on the existing lists. Many enquiries were in consequence inappropriately addressed. The PRO agreed to look at improving the indexing of interests on the on-line lists. The printed lists were more problematic in terms of a cost-effective solution. A critical issue in general for the PRO was containing the costs of administering the professional researcher service. If costs rose then there would inevitably be pressure to charge for a place on the Lists. This would increase complexity and costs all round, and might drive some of the more specialist researchers off the List.

5.2.5 The removal of titles and qualifications was not contested. TT-M asked about the removal of company names, and the listing of researchers by personal name only. There were comments that the use of company names might (a) be used only to gain advantage in the alphabetical listing (b) give a misleading impression of the actual service provided. IW said the PRO would consider the issue.

6. Professional Researcher Meeting - 10.00-11.00am 17 March 2000 FRC

Present:

RISD: Iain Watt, Guy Grannum and Mark Pearsall

Professional Researchers: P E Stewart, Janice Robinson and Sean Creighton.

6.1 General Services

6.1.1 There were positive comments on services in general.

6.1.2 JR pointed out that the catalogue could be very slow at times. SC said it would be useful to remind people to report errors and corrections to the lists or catalogue when needed.

6.1.3 JR said there were problems with the seating space and the size of the MLDR. Overcrowding was a problem on days when it was busy.

6.1.4 SC said the copying service was much better.

6.2 Professional Researchers

6.2.1 SC was concerned over the PRO's policy, and that a statement of service might imply a contact with the PRO. IW made it clear that the statement would be their own, or of a professional body to which they belong. The only contract was between the client and the researcher.

6.2.2 So long as we were not going to impose further requirements or restrictions on the professional researchers they did not see a problem with our proposed changes.

7. Comments received by letter/e-mail

Letters with comments were received from Patricia Martin, Sean Creighton, Kay Priestley, Stephen Smith, Tim Hughes, Ian Hilder and Roger Barrington.

7.1 Specialist/Generalist Record Agent (PM, SC, KP, SS)

Can the lists differentiate between the two/should there be two separate lists?

7.2 Copies of terms and Conditions (PM, SC, SS)

7.2.1 There is a reluctance to supply us with copies of terms and conditions. This maybe because it is thought that the PRO may use the information to favour some IR's in preference to others

7.2.2 There are concerns that to supply terms and conditions/statements of services to potential clients is in many cases a waste of time and expensive if correspondence is by post. Initial contacts are made by many potential clients but only a small proportion are taken up.

7.2.3 Those on the Internet are constantly bombarded by e-mails, which have often been sent to many other researchers as well. Formal procedures are therefore inappropriate and un-necessary.

7.3 AGRA membership (IH, TH)

7.3.1 In favour of a code of practice for all researchers on the List.

The PRO should support AGRA and encourage all professional researchers on the List to join.

7.3.2 An independent complaints procedure should be available. AGRA is the only body with an independent complaints procedure.

7.4 Potential Clients (PM, SC, KP)

Better guidance to the public on what they should expect and what they should supply in the way of information and instructions.

7.5 Qualifications (SS, TH)

7.5.1 The removal of qualifications was felt to make choosing an academic researcher more difficult and pandering to the family history market too much.

7.5.2 Qualifications should continue to be shown as it indicates capacity for research in an academic field.

8. Comments received on the above report.

8.1 Only six responses were received from researchers to the above report sent out on 10 April; comments were asked for by 10 May. Comments were sent in by John Dekin-Parry (JD-P), Bill Duffin (BD), Antony Hemans (AH), Ian Hilder (IH), Roger Nixon (RN) and Bob O'Hara (B'OH).

- 8.1.2 RN seemed a little upset that some points may have been omitted from the notes of the meetings. He and RB and TH had made it clear that they thought the PRO should have a basic policy to which independent researchers could abide. RN said that it was not accepted that new boxes ie. a new field should be added to the PRO website. In RN's opinion there was no agreement for this to happen, "Leave it with researchers to draw attention to membership and codes on their own sites rather than have boxes against each name." RN is in favour of a partnership with the PRO and that we should set a standard for researchers to follow. JD-P in his e-mail is of the view it is a matter for each researcher and we should drop the proposal.
- 8.1.3 JD-P is against removing qualifications or company names from the lists. BO'H, however, strongly supported the removal of all such titles and qualifications, as did AH, who was also keen to remove company names.
- 8.1.4 BD, AH, RH all make adverse comments about AGRA. BD wanted it to be made clear that it is not only AGRA who have a complaints procedure, ISRA do so as well (see 7.3.2)
- 8.1.5 AH, RN, BO'H would prefer a PRO standard. It is believed that we are only doing this exercise because of lobbying by AGRA.